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‘A New Order is Being Created’: Domestic Modernism in 1930s Britain

Daniel Moore

The interior is the asylum where art takes refuge.

– Walter Benjamin

‘In the ground floor showrooms are some examples of gaily painted Omega furniture, with decorated designs ranging from asymmetric, irregular patches of bright colours to geometric designs and even to actual representation of the human figure. The effect is enlivening and stimulating – but is it possible to live in such a motley setting?’¹ Such was the opinion expressed in *The Observer* in a review of an exhibition of Omega-ware at Roger Fry’s Fitzroy Square showroom and workshop in the year Omega was to close. While bold, innovative, non-representational art had started to earn its place on the walls of the nation’s galleries by 1919, the interior of the home still remained a contested space for advanced design because of the challenges it mounted to ideas of domesticity. Coloured strongly by ideas of religion, morality, and virtue, the layout and decoration of the Victorian and Edwardian living space signified so much more than a taste for certain patterns, colours, and objects, and the often brutal changes meted out by modernist artists and designers were attacks on bourgeois complacencies and on sublimations of the psyche as much as they were on the design of the sideboard or sofa. For Jean Badovici, interior design ‘not only reflects [the homeowner’s] way of living and his preoccupations, it also helps him get a clearer picture of himself. Interior decoration helps him to strike the necessary balance between his most sacred and hidden desires and the outside world of his daily activities’.² In an age of mass production, cheap goods, and increased spending power for the middle classes, the

home became a testing ground for new ideas about health, class, and gender identity, a locus for expressions of taste and refinement and a site of debate about the relationship between private and public spheres. Major aesthetic movements across Europe and the United States – from Art Nouveau to Jugendstil to Streamline Moderne – concerned themselves with the design and decoration of the living space, and many *avant garde* artists took commissions to make the home artistic. Despite this, many historians of the period define modernism as the opposite of the domestic. Christopher Reed argues that high modernism had ‘no time to spare for the mundane details of home life and housekeeping’ and that ‘the domestic, perpetually invoked in order to be denied, remains throughout the course of modernism a crucial site of anxiety and subversion’.³

Yet this is to tell an all too familiar story. A narrative that leads smoothly from a Victorian domestic world of clutter to a modern, rational living space suited to the often idealistic and utopian visions for the present and the future omits some of the misfires and outright commercial failures of domestic modernism in Britain. Many British attempts to engender change in the design and decoration of the home were short-lived affairs. Even Omega, by far the most prominent design initiative of the early twentieth century – and most prominently critiqued – lasted just six years and had limited contemporary public influence. My discussion here of the attempts to integrate advanced aesthetics and interior design in Britain in the 1930s is full of failures in a sense, too. None of the initiatives I discuss below led directly to any wide-scale change in living standards in Britain, nor did any of them really capture the imagination of the purchasing public. A history of such attempts reveals much about the dissemination of ideas of taste in British society in the 1930s and about the reification of the home in the period as a site for what Pierre Bourdieu terms *habitus*.

Bourdieu’s term is a useful one in this context because what lay behind many of the designs discussed below was not simply a redefinition of domestic aesthetics but a refinement

of ‘living’: what was signified by the home space and how it shaped individual and collective identity. Unconscious though such an impulse might have been, the connection between avant-garde aesthetics and socialisation – particularly in domestic design aimed at revitalising the living conditions of the urban poor in Britain – is noticeable in the promotion and advertisement of some of the schemes discussed below, which often imagined new modes of living alongside the products and spaces they were marketing. What my case studies here expose, then, are the utopian attempts made by architects and designers in Britain to reinvent the individual and the public through the design and decoration of the home. At the heart of many of these initiatives was the fervent desire to shape public taste: at a moment when mass production and cheap goods threatened a new age of clutter and bric-a-brac, a number of architects and designers in Britain were devoting themselves to design education for the public – through exhibitions, through advertisement, and through sales. And behind each initiative was a firm belief that by advancing public taste an improvement in social conditions could be effected.

The Isokon building (fig. 1), for example, an experiment in communal living on Lawn Road in Hampstead, was designed by the architect Wells Coates to be ‘modern among the moderns, a monument to the pious aspiration of salvation through good design and social consciousness which was the key signature of English avant-garde thought in the thirties’.⁴ The Design and Industries Association (DIA), a group founded in 1915 but arguably most active, and with most influence, in the 1930s, dedicated itself to the same end: to ‘influence and guide public taste’ in Britain.⁵ The activities of this group, and its philosophical principle that ‘Nothing Need be Ugly’, draw obvious parallels with the Arts and Crafts movement, but its attempts to negotiate the differences between the often extreme aesthetics of designers and the demands of the marketplace mark it out as a key mediator in debates around public taste in the 1930s. And there are any number of other private, *ad hoc* and voluntary ventures

across Britain in the 1930s whose achievements have been discussed in isolation but whose influence and value for later British domestic design practices *en masse* are less well understood.⁶ What has been particularly ill-explored in the history of British domestic design of the 1930s are the productive connections between designers, patrons, and quasi-state sponsored groups which helped to shape and condition production, advertising, marketing, and selling of modernist design aesthetics to the British public. What I draw out below are some of the ways in which modernist domestic design was supported by new exhibition strategies and new modes of advertising, and how the gradual infiltration of design groups by modernists helped to mould British domestic and urban design into the twentieth century.

If Wells Coates was correct – that his flats on Lawn Road and other initiatives like it mark out a dialogue between good design and social awareness unique to the 1930s – the legacy of these ventures might not lie purely in the design principles they left behind, but in the social and philosophical imperative that good domestic architecture and interior design might lead towards both an improvement in the quotidian activities of the public and towards an amelioration in standards of taste in Britain. As precursors to much more visible and policy-backed initiatives that flourished after the Second World War – such as the Council of Industrial Design which was formed in 1944 and which was the driver for the much discussed ‘Britain Can Make It’ exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1946 – many of these ventures were piecemeal, short-lived, and poorly funded.⁷ They did, however, firmly assert the need for a revolution in domestic design and architecture that would have profound and wide-reaching consequences for urban planning, social housing, and public health in the decades after the War. In the context of the difficult economic climate of the 1930s, they suggested responses and solutions to the problems of poor living in Britain, arguing that aesthetic improvements in the domestic space would lead to improvements – however nebulous these might be – in standards of living. Such improvements shaped the aesthetic

qualities of British modernist interior design in the 1930s and were important considerations, in particular, in the formative debates about working-class housing and about the role of women in the home. The modernist interior in Britain was therefore a site of contest between competing ideas of rational living, functionality, comfort, and cost, and I want to explore here some of the ways in which modernist innovation in Britain offered solutions which attempted to negotiate these tensions. As Cheryl Buckley argues, the 1930s home ‘could be modern, modernist and ‘English’ at the same time’.⁸



Figure 1: Lawn Road Flats, architect Wells Coates

Undoubtedly, English or British domestic design took much from abroad, but designers were not simply drawing on advanced continental aesthetics. While the historiography of British design since Nikolaus Pevsner’s *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) has stressed just how much British design borrowed from abroad, there has been little commentary on how individuals and groups in Britain drew on the organisational structures,

pedagogical principles, and working practices of continental groups. The success of the Deutscher Werkbund, the loose affiliation of designers, architects, craftsmen, and artists that flourished in Munich in the early years of the twentieth century, was the model behind the construction of the DIA in 1915. In 1916, when heightened anti-German rhetoric prevailed in almost all of the arts, H. H. Peach, one of the founders of the DIA, expressed an admiration of German organisation in design matters. 'The aim of the Werkbund', he wrote, 'is the ennobling of German industrial work through the cooperation of art, industry and handicraft, by means of education, propaganda, and the adoption of a definite attitude on allied questions.' German designers and manufacturers 'have worked towards the production of sound goods which should give the death-blow to the shoddy'.⁹ What the Werkbund seemed to prove for the founders of the DIA was that holistic thinking in design and manufacturing would produce well-made, well-conceived products for the home that would be inexpensive. It's not hard to find the same sentiments in the DIA's mission brief as late as 1931:

[The DIA] should bring the manufacturer and all people with powers of recommendation into touch with competent designers. At the moment, the manufacturer regards the designer as an artist. That idea has got to be smashed. He has got to come around to the view that a designer is just as essential a part of modern industrial personnel as a Works manager and an Electrical Engineer.¹⁰

Embedded more centrally in the production process in this way, the modernist designer would benefit from the closer collaboration with the makers of his or her products. Herbert Read came to the same conclusion, too, arguing that 'the abstract artist [...] must be given a place in all industries in which he is already established, and his decision on all questions of

design must be final'.¹¹ By being involved in the process more directly, the design would be conditioned more acutely by viability and by price. It was, in particular, the disconnect between design and price that the DIA felt had caused British design to fall behind its European counterparts. In an unpublished pamphlet in 1931, the organising committee wrote:

Standards of design are changing in the direction of greater simplicity and there is a growing appreciation on the part of the general public for better designed goods at inexpensive prices. This demand is at present being met by imports from abroad and the demand is being fostered by this supply. The impetus towards modern design, therefore, is coming from abroad, and the foreign manufacturer is gaining on the English manufacturer. It is up to the English manufacturer to do as the foreign industrialist has done, foster this changed outlook in the home market and with the experience gained challenge in the markets abroad.¹²

The cost of good design was of course a major consideration in a period of austerity in Britain, so much so that the cause was taken up by the government. The Gorrell report of 1932 was perhaps the first attempt in British civic affairs to use domestic taste as an important indicator of national well-being. Comprising important aesthetes, designers, and critics – such as Roger Fry and Margaret Bulley – the committee which produced the report was tasked with finding an answer to the problem of how best ‘to raise the level of Industrial Art in the United Kingdom’.¹³ Although it reached no conclusions about the way in which this improvement in the quality of design and manufacture might be achieved, the committee’s report strongly asserted its belief that the time had come to make significant changes to the way in which British manufacturers and designers communicated with each

other and to the ways in which the public could be better educated about interior design and decoration. Even in an age of economic hardship, plans could be made to re-energise British markets for interior goods. Indeed, the committee felt that economic pressures, perversely, could be the driving force behind 'positive measures to improve the quality of design and workmanship, and to foster an intelligent appreciation of design by the public [...] Educative propaganda will, we believe, fall on more receptive ground in these times of adversity than in times of plenty.'¹⁴

The main achievement of the Gorrell committee was the establishment of the Council for Art and Industry (CAI), set up in 1933, as a means to make real the findings of the report. The CAI, in addition to producing reports on the condition of the working class home and the role of the designer in industry, was involved in organising large-scale exhibitions devoted to the problem of the home.¹⁵ Some of the more advanced domestic designs premiered at such exhibitions as 'Art in the Home' (1933) and 'Contemporary Industrial Design in the Home' (1934). These were among the first exhibitions in Britain to embrace the spirit of the modern design movement, and they also reflected some of the new developments in exhibition culture across Europe and the United States. They also served to reassert the importance of British design on an international stage. The failure of British design to endorse modern advances meant, according to the organisers of the 'Art and Industry' Exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1934, that 'markets both home and abroad [...] have been filled up with goods of foreign competitors that have readily found buyers on account of their cheapness and of the intrinsic beauty of their conception'.¹⁶

Such exhibitions were designed to market and to educate, building on exhibition techniques developed on the continent. There was a pronounced shift in the early twentieth century from displaying and selling the interior as an *ad hoc* collection of individual decorative or functional objects to more holistic ways of advertising. Increasingly, interiors

were represented in exhibitions on a much larger scale, with whole rooms and sets of rooms constructed in situ. Merchants and exhibitors even went so far as to show kitchens complete with toast and boiled eggs to give a sense of that 'just lived in' feel. As early as the *Salon d'Automne* in 1910, Bruno Paul and Richard Riemerschmid – two of the leading figures of the Werkbund movement – displayed rooms on the theme of a 'House of an Art Lover', filled with objects that were mass-produced but which appealed to a cultured Parisian audience. The setting of objects in a legitimately liveable space (boudoir, music rooms, dining rooms, and even a bathroom) meant that attendees were not just viewing individual objects of merit but were being encouraged to visualise a particular lifestyle associated with such ownership and decoration. Such strategies also borrowed from the way in which interiors were sold and packaged in department stores. From the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris in 1925, the close relationships forged between exhibitors and department stores meant that displays at such events were well funded and very reproducible.

Exhibitions began to reify the interior as a way of life and a way of being in the world. Instead of reflecting the preoccupations and taste of its occupiers, the new modernist interior became complicit in constructing personal identity within wider social structures. By the 1930s, events such as the Ideal Home Exhibition routinely used whole-room sets which did more than just market the sum total of their parts. Room designers developed an increasingly sophisticated relationship with a better informed purchasing public, marketing lifestyles and identities far more than ever before. By 1946, and the seminal 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, rooms were given incredibly specialised titles – right down to the occupations of potential occupiers – and visitors to the exhibition were invited, by a sign on the wall, to 'view the rooms as if the family had just vacated them.'¹⁷

Several modernist voices in the early 1930s reacted quite strongly against this kind of exhibition culture, for a number of reasons. For one, the interiors on display were often felt to be beyond the means of the purchasing public. For another, what was being sold as ‘new’ or ‘modern’ was often sham imitations of what would later be known as Art Deco style. With ostentatious use of surface material, high production costs and derivative aesthetic value, such objects and designs were emptied of the philosophical impulse behind the 1925 Paris show and were derogatorily termed ‘modernistic’ by many commentators sympathetic to the kind of organic aesthetics and truth to material that Art Deco embodied. Julian Holder observes that ‘sunburst motifs formed part of the vocabulary of the speculative builder of the period. To many a Modernist this treatment, restricted to surface decoration, was as ‘bogus’ as the mock-Tudor.’¹⁸ Betraying none of the philosophy behind home-grown modernist experiments in design – low-cost material, reproducibility, robustness – the fact that such designs were heavily marketed meant that the profit motive overtook the emphasis on good design, and that many households were being marketed lifestyles which they simply could not afford. Jack Pritchard and W. F. Crittall wrote on behalf of the DIA to *The Times* to complain about the Royal Academy exhibition ‘Art and Industry’ held in early 1934:

In spite of the announcement that it should be concerned with articles produced by mechanical means for everyday use, the emphasis throughout is on decorative art and on things produced individually for the rich. While a few standardised things are to be seen in most sections, the general impression is that of a luxury exhibit. For instance, in furniture there is hardly a room or piece which could be considered for people of ordinary means. The implication is that design is a matter of extravagant and fancy styles.¹⁹

Such elitism was not new, of course. As Penny Sparke argues about Art Nouveau, 'it was really only fully successful in the highly idealized homes that architects created for themselves and their families, and in those of a relatively small number of 'far-sighted' wealthy clients who were prepared to live with a high level of aesthetic control in their homes in exchange for the cultural capital they gained from it'.²⁰ This accusation of elitism was levelled, too, at the more extreme and puritanical designs in the Le Corbusier style. The difficulty with the ultra-modern, or 'the new' as Wyndham Lewis derogatorily called it in a series of essays in the early 1930s, was that it alienated the individual from his or her own home: 'Those modernist suites of furniture – even 'attractive' up to a point – are undeniably ultra-puritan in conception [...] An 'ideal home' furnished with these uncompromisingly severe bookcases, rugs, steel chairs and aluminium beds, angular armchairs and so forth, would be *ideal* only for the very few.'²¹

Critiquing the 'approved chromium-plated, vitriolic manner' of such interiors, Lewis finds that the promotion of new, 'modernistic' lifestyles served to disconnect the individual from any real sense of what purpose his home was to serve: 'Interiors of any pretensions to beauty in the past tended to signify that the person inhabiting them was spiritually a match for his surroundings. It is only today, owing to the conditions of machine-production, and the machine technology that goes with it, that what a person *uses* tells us nothing whatever about what he *is*.'²² Slick advertising of lifestyles ('such as you see advertised in the luxury-magazine') led, for Lewis, to 'robotic tastes, with an itch for the rigours of the anchorite, and a sentimental passion for metal as opposed to wood, and a super-Victorian conviction that cleanliness is next to godliness'.²³

There were, however, attempts in Britain to navigate these concerns about elitism and apéry. Wells Coates, whom Lewis singles out for praise in the article quoted above, was

one of a group of architects and designers – among them Maxwell Fry, Elizabeth Denby, Basil Ward, Amyas Connell, Colin Lucas, and Jack Pritchard – who were deeply concerned about the social aspects of design, and alive to the dangers that mass-consumption brought to standards of taste. Coates' modernist credentials can hardly be stronger. A founding member of Unit One, he moved in *avant-garde* circles in the early 1930s, and he recalled later on that his intellectual development at this time was shaped by his reading in modernist literature, art, and philosophy.²⁴ Coates was committed to designs that were affordable, easily reproducible, modular, and – above all – responsive to the problems of daily life for the average man and woman. In this sense, the Lawn Road Flats that Coates designed in 1933-34 for Jack and Molly Pritchard were part of a broader attempt in Britain to mediate, modify and make affordable modernist design principles. Christened with a ceremonial bottle of beer – in lieu of champagne – by the MP for Islington East (Thelma Cazalet) in July 1934, the Lawn Road Flats housed a number of artists and intellectuals, including Agatha Christie, Naum Gabo and Walter Gropius, throughout the next few decades. Conceived as an experiment in communal living, Isokon embraced many of the design principles of Streamline Moderne and of the rather more puritanical Le Corbusier style, but built with frugality and an awareness of the rather mundane aspects of daily living in mind. Rent was £96 for a single apartment for a year, up to £170 for a double, and included heating, cleaning, and shoe polishing, and could be extended to include meals. Many of the facilities in the building were shared.

The building met with mixed reviews. *The News Chronicle*, though wary of the building's aesthetics, opined that 'the experiment is the signpost to a new order – it represents in concrete and steel the new attitude towards this business of living which is beginning to emerge from our present day chaos.'²⁵ For *The Observer*, it 'consist[ed] of a four-storey structure of a somewhat fortress type of ferro-concrete. Most conservative minded folk would say that any partiality in this direction must needs be an acquired taste, as the saying goes.'²⁶

Even as late as 1946, the building was capable of causing controversy. *Horizon*, the influential arts magazine edited by Cyril Connolly, declared it to be the second ugliest building in Britain in their December 1946 issue. Pritchard was outraged: 'We all know it is a highly controversial building but surely there is plenty of ugliness in London that requires condemnation before this pioneer effort [...] I feel that an example of architecture of the Gropius-Moholy-Nagy school should be encouraged rather than the reverse.'²⁷

Gropius was also annoyed by the tone of Connolly's piece, but defended the building on the grounds of its utilitarian qualities rather than its aesthetic appearance. It was, he wrote to Connolly, 'the result of careful study of contemporary living'.²⁸ One subject of this 'careful study' was the housewife. Pritchard recalled a desire to ease the work of the housewife at Isokon, and 'Miss Cazalet, speaking on the Roof Garden, said that at a time when work in education and industry was being simplified it was right that they should lessen and lighten the work of women in the home.'²⁹ *The Portsmouth Evening News* wondered, however, that 'if this sort of ménage becomes generally available, will not the housewife become a modern and feminine example of an occupationless Othello?'³⁰ The *Bournemouth Daily Echo* went further, suggesting that the functional living space of Isokon 'seemed to make the housewife herself a superfluity'.³¹ Debates about the implication that the new interior design would have on traditional gender roles abounded during the 1930s. The introduction of efficiency into the home – through mechanisation and rationalisation – prompted significant debate about the role that the housewife would play in the twentieth-century home. Certainly, as Penny Sparke argues, labour saving devices and rationalist planning of working spaces in the home (especially the kitchen) began to erode the idea that the home was a place of labour and, in turn, 'the emphasis in housework had moved to nurturing and consuming rather than producing.'³² Isokon was a good example of such a space. Even the visual presence of the labours of the home is erased: service elevators, room

cleaning and shoe cleaning services, meals delivered through a system of dumb waiters from large central kitchens – these all placed domestic labour outside the skin of the living space.

The interior of the Lawn Road flats demonstrated just how much Wells Coates and Jack Pritchard had studied the demands of contemporary living. Embracing a muted version of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the Isokon flats had many inbuilt features, including floor coverings, light fittings, sliding table, divan with overlay, dressing table, cooker, and refrigerator. Decoratively, though, they were a blank canvas. White walls came as standard, and the visual effect produced by the interiors is a mix of healthiness and cleanliness, of the kind promoted by Le Corbusier in *Towards a New Architecture*: ‘Our houses disgust us’, he remarks – ‘Let us purge [them].’³³ To this end, reviewers of the building felt that this functionalist outlook would afford occupants the chance to develop the interior in their own personal ways: ‘the built-in equipment is strictly functional and unobtrusive, said *The Medical Officer*, ‘and cannot offend the individual taste as someone else’s furniture and accessories are almost bound to offend.’³⁴ The danger, of course, was that occupants would soon clutter up the place:

the chief danger from the point of view of those who admire the simplicity and airiness of the contemporary style is that, from force of habit, the tenants of such new flats will ruin their character and abolish half their advantages by overloading with knick-knacks [...] Twentieth century houses need twentieth century tenants; you won’t get the best out of a 1934 supercharged sports car if you’ve still got a horse-and-trap mentality.³⁵

If blank spaces could be provided, and the working classes educated on how best to design them, then a revolution in the standards of taste could be effected. For Wyndham Lewis, it was a case of it being

far better to have *nothing* on the walls than vulgar and trivial things; and it must always be remembered that [the average person] possesses no taste at all, and should if possible be restrained from buying those coloured prints of comic Bonzos he naturally favours and putting them up on his walls [...]. He should put himself humbly in the hands of a competent modernist designer, and cubist-bungalow architect, and allow them to *ration* him, very strictly indeed, in the matter of everything barring strict necessities.³⁶

It was not necessary to hang modernist pictures of the most geometric kind everywhere: ‘you can with advantage hang *any* picture on the most modernist wall.’³⁷ Isokon took advantage of its publicity photographs to demonstrate the point. The promotional shot of the living rooms (figure 3) shows a collection of functional objects and a geometric sculpture alongside what are clearly figurative and not abstract paintings on the wall. Figure 4 shows the bottom half of a painting that is clearly figurative, too.

High functionality is mixed with low cost material everywhere at Isokon. Yet there is a surprising intimacy at work in these interiors. The Long Chair (displayed in figure 3) was designed by Marcel Breuer, who had never used plywood before. It is markedly different from his rectilinear, cold Bauhaus designs, and illustrates the general invitation to luxuriate in the living and sleeping spaces. This design, among others, was featured in the first Isokon furniture catalogue, produced to give occupants the chance to buy functional, sleek,

modernist designs inexpensively. Founded by Pritchard, Gropius, and Breuer, the company made low-cost solutions to everyday demands. Book cases were the first design that Isokon Furniture worked on: functional, two-material shelves were designed to be modular and easily moved around, and the price was relatively cheap: a 42” long set of three shelves was 28s6d. The modular nature of the units is clear in figure 4. Pritchard’s papers reveal that, though popular with residents, Isokon furniture was difficult to market more widely at first, but the importation of Scandinavian furniture in the mid-1930s from Aalto in particular meant that these similar designs soon gained a place in some of the larger department stores in Britain: in Dunns of Bromley, in Crofton Ganes of Bristol, and in Heals, Bowmans, Fortnum and Mason, and John Lewis in London. Pritchard received a communication from Fortnum and Mason in 1935 that the ‘Finnish Exhibits’ were selling so fast that they ‘were beginning to feel nervous about the continuity of supplies.’³⁸



Figure 2: Lawn Road Flats, Bedroom (courtesy of Pritchard Papers, University of East Anglia).



Figure 3: Lawn Road Flats, Living Room (courtesy of Pritchard Papers, University of East Anglia).



Figure 4: Modular Unit (courtesy of Pritchard Papers, University of East Anglia).

Far from being an isolated test case for modernist living in Britain, the records of the Isokon company clearly demonstrate that they were to be the first in a series of similar projects across the country, with flats planned in Manchester and in Birmingham (both of which failed because of the difficult economic climate in the later 1930s). Designed with reproducibility in mind, the modular interior structure of each flat meant that the erection of new buildings could be undertaken quickly and without excessive waste. The lifestyle it promoted was part of a wider move to educate the public about the ways in which best to furnish the home.

The DIA, too, was busy attempting to effect a change in the way that the British public consumed interior goods. Founded in 1915, its early years were dominated by a membership with a rather fuzzy remit to encourage better design and with a firmly Arts and Crafts philosophy. For the first years of its existence, the DIA was a fairly reactionary group, its staid committee composed of people like craftsman H. H. Peach; the painter, draughtsman, and poster designer Ernest Jackson; and Harold Stabler, a leading silversmith. By the early 1930s, however, its membership included Maxwell Fry, Mansfield Forbes, and Raymond McGrath, along with Coates and Pritchard. While it was involved in the organisation of many exhibitions during the period – in particular the Dorland Hall exhibition of 1933 at which Isokon premiered its designs – it endeavoured to place education and propaganda at the heart of its activities. A re-drafted ‘Aims of the DIA’ for internal debate included the desire to ‘create Liaison Officers between design and industry, men of taste and business ability who will steer manufacturers from employing incompetent half-wits who masquerade as designers, and who really represent the annual deposit of refuse from the Art Schools of this country.’³⁹

The DIA had also started to make better use of advertising, marketing, and broadcasting channels, particularly after the mid-1920s arrival of John Gloag and Noel Carrington. Both men were involved in publishing before they arrived at the DIA, and both contributed to a re-invigorated new programme of propaganda aimed at the public at large. In 1930, the DIA was featured on the BBC radio programme *Changing World*. J. E. Barton, the headmaster of Bristol Grammar School and a member of the DIA, was selected by the BBC to offer talks that ‘range[d] over architecture and pots and pans as well as sculpture and painting.’⁴⁰ The talks ran the gamut of art and design, stressing the importance of individual appreciation (‘Do we use our eyes?’, ‘What is taste?’) and the social aspects of urban design (‘Will the new city make new men?’). As part of a wider shift in BBC broadcasting policy in

the 1930s, which opened up topics previously deemed too controversial for discussion, these talks offered a way to bridge the perceived gap, keenly felt by the DIA and by MARS (Modern Architectural Research), between advanced aesthetics and the public. If Maxwell Fry's policy at MARS in the 1930s was to have 'nothing to do with the general press [...] because the ideas were too difficult to bridge the gap between ourselves and the *Daily Mail*', then such broadcasts, with accompanying text in the new BBC periodical *The Listener*, meant that there was another way to mediate modernist domestic design.

If mediation of these ideas was to work, however, there needed to be some mechanism to estimate the standard of British taste. Of particular concern was the working class, susceptible as they were to showiness, gaudiness, and purchasing items of doubtful quality. The massive slum clearance that took place in the 1930s meant an opportunity to improve the quality of the poorer urban interior, and a government committee was formed to investigate the standard of the working-class home.⁴¹ Organised by the Council for Art and Industry and staffed with key figures from modernist design in Britain – Frank Pick chaired the committee and Elizabeth Denby, who collaborated so closely with Maxwell Fry on working-class housing at Kensall Green, was also involved – meant that the responses proposed in the final report emphasised the same solutions that Isokon and the DIA were advocating. The report, *The Working Class Home: Its Furnishing and Equipment*, proposed solutions that involved catalogues of furniture from which working-class occupants could choose and pay via hire purchase or voucher schemes, classes to encourage the purchase of quality homewares, and the rationalisation of the kitchen.⁴² The report despaired of an 'accumulation of patterns which is often conflicting and tiresome' and stressed a desire to educate the working class public in household efficiency and in purchasing fewer bulky items for the home, thereby echoing Le Corbusier's *Manual of the Dwelling* where he cringed at houses in which he 'hardly dare[d] to walk through the labyrinth of their furniture'.⁴³ While

several critics have found the report's premises to be grossly inaccurate (Jules Lubbock argues that financial and logistical aspects of such plans were utterly ill-conceived), the democratising impulse behind such attempts clearly draws on the need freely to disseminate the premises of domestic modernist design as widely as possible.⁴⁴

Other groups were funded with the same principles at heart: Jack Pritchard's democratizing tendencies and continental aesthetics were channelled into other programmatic endeavours during the 1930s and 1940s. As a member of the influential MARS group, a loosely affiliated chapter of *Les Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne* (CIAM) formed in 1933 by Maxwell Fry, Morton Shand, and F. R. S. Yorke, Pritchard was instrumental, along with M. Hartland Thomas, in highlighting the need for even the most streamlined Moderne forms to express a sense of community and collegiality. MARS's discussion document, 'Architecture and the Common Man: some points for discussion' from November 1946 echoes Pritchard's belief in the need for modern architecture to connect with and enliven the life of the masses: 'A modern aesthetic,' they write, 'must not be restricted to the taste of an esoteric coterie [and] must come to terms with common people.'⁴⁵ The influence of Pritchard's furniture designs was felt keenly through the War and after. Pritchard was, for a short time at the end of the Second World War, chair of the Design Sub-Group of the Furniture Working Party, set up by the government as part of a broader effort (known as the Utility Scheme) to ensure that materials made scarce by the war effort were used to best effect. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that the War forced designs on the British public of the kind that Pritchard, Coates, and the DIA were struggling to promote in the decade before hostilities broke out. Pritchard acknowledged, in the 'Preface' to the *Working Party Report on Furniture* of 1946, that 'in spite of its limitations of choice, we believe that the utility furniture scheme has done much to accustom a wider public to a better standard of design'.⁴⁶

Attempts to invigorate the domestic space in Britain in the 1930s represent utopian thinking. Though most attempts before the end of the Second World War to effect a change in the working-class living conditions were only isolated successes, the structures and principles for a more radical change were in place and the massive social housing initiatives that blossomed after 1945 are one noticeable legacy of the work of the DIA and the CAI. The productive resonance between the state, quasi-governmental organisations, and individual designers in the 1930s meant that socially committed modernist domestic design would flourish in the years after the Second World War. If the state of interior design in the 1930s had prompted the need for action – at the level of state, *ad hoc* and individual enterprise – the end of the decade had seen the implementation of several strategies to better shape the design and use of the domestic interior. By the end of the decade, publications such as *Design for Today* (first issue 1933) and *Art and Industry* (first issue 1936) were field-leading journals that betrayed none of the reactionary spirit and mournful longing of those aging voices from the Arts and Crafts movement, and which were involved in the process of forging modernist design based on ‘British’ values. The pages of these journals are home to various attempts to isolate and distil a ‘British’ design identity and to analyse how new, modernist forms might help forge that identity. It is telling that some of the most experimental designers and planners of the domestic space in the 1930s – like Frank Pick, Wells Coates, Maxwell Fry, and Elizabeth Denby – were remembered by John Gloag in 1947 to be working in an English tradition running ‘back to medieval England, back to the wisdom of men who worked with simple tools, few materials and abundant ingenuity’.⁴⁷ If 1930s experiments in living laid the path for social housing and urban design, their adaption and mediation of European *avant-garde* aesthetics is marked by what Elizabeth Darling calls an ‘anglicization of continental European tropes’.⁴⁸ The design ethos displayed and exhibited at the Festival of Britain in 1951 is one legacy of British domestic experimentation in the 1930s. The ‘product of the

socially reformist agenda dominating post-war Britain', the Festival celebrated in part the opportunities offered by the new welfare state to transform quotidian, everyday Britain.⁴⁹ But at a more esoteric level, the Festival embraced the same philosophical imperatives as 1930s 'exhibit-and-educate' culture. It was, for Becky E. Conekin, 'simultaneously a public celebration, an educational undertaking, and a constructed vision of a new democratic national community'.⁵⁰

Notes

¹ 'Art and Artists: The Omega Workshops', *The Observer*, Sunday March 2, 1919.

² Peter Adam, *Eileen Gray, Architect/Designer: A Biography* (New York: Harry N Abrams, Inc., 2000), p. 165.

³ Christopher Reed, 'Introduction' in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), pp. 15-16.

⁴ From a draft editorial for the *Architectural Review*, 1955. Pritchard Papers at University of East Anglia (hereafter PP) 16/2/28/5/2.

⁵ 'Aims of the DIA', unpublished document, 11th August 1931. PP/28/1.

⁶ Elizabeth Darling discusses, among others, Maxwell Fry's Kensal House in Ladbroke Grove and the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham in *Re-forming Britain: Narratives of Modernity before Reconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2006); Dennis Sharp and Sally Rendell discuss the designs of Connell, Ward and Lucas in *Connell Ward and Lucas: Modern Movement Architects in England 1929-39* (London, Francis Lincoln, 2008), pp. 154-159.

⁷ The history of the 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition is admirably recorded by Jonathan M. Woodham, 'The Politics of Persuasion: State, Industry and Good Design at the *Britain Can*

Make It Exhibition’ in Patrick J. Maguire and Jonathan M. Woodham (eds.) *Design and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1997), pp. 45-66.

⁸ Cheryl Buckley, *Designing Modern Britain* (London: Reaktion, 2007), 86. Much attention has been paid to the difficult relationship between modernism and national identity in Britain. See Jeremy Lewison, ‘Going Modern and Being British: The Challenge of the 1930s’ in Henry Meyric Hughes and Gijs van Tuyl (eds.), *Blast to Freeze: British Art in the Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam: Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002), 66-72; Sue Malvern, *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2004); Standish Meacham, *Regaining Paradise: Englishness and the Early Garden City Movement* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1999); Mark Crinson, ‘Architecture and ‘National Projection’ between the Wars’ in Dana Arnold (ed), *Cultural Identities and the Aesthetics of Britishness* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004), 182-200; William Whyte, ‘The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the Making of a National International Style, 1927-1957’ in *Journal of British Studies* (48.2 (April 2009), 441-465.

⁹ H. H. Peach, ‘Museums and the Design and Industries Association’, *The American Magazine of Art* Vol. 7, No. 5 (March 1916), 197-200 (p. 198).

¹⁰ ‘Aims of the DIA’, unpublished document, 11th August 1931. PP/28/1

¹¹ Herbert Read, *Art and Industry: The Principles of Industrial Design* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 53.

¹² PP/28/2/18

¹³ Lord Gorrell, *Art and Industry: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Board of Trade under the Chairmanship of Lord Gorrell on the Production and Exhibition of Articles of Good Design and Everyday Use* (London, 1932), 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, 18.

¹⁵ These two reports were *The Working Class Home: Its Furnishing and Equipment* (London, 1937) and *Design and the Designer in Industry* (London, 1937).

¹⁶ *British Art in Industry, 1935: Illustrated Souvenir* (London: Royal Academy, 1935), 1.

¹⁷ Penny Sparke, *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 68.

¹⁸ Julian Holder, “‘Design in Everyday Things’: Promoting Modernism in Britain, 1912-1944’ in Paul Greenhalgh, *Modernism in Design* (London: Reaktion, 1990), pp. 123-145 (p. 137).

¹⁹ PP 28/4/26.

²⁰ Sparke, *The Modern Interior*, p. 38.

²¹ Wyndham Lewis, ‘Home-Builder: Where is your Vorticist?’ in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis: Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society 1914-1956* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), pp. 246-256 (pp. 246-7).

²² Wyndham Lewis, ‘Art in Industry’ in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis: Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society 1914-1956* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), pp. 241-245 (p. 245).

²³ Lewis, ‘Home-Builder’, pp. 254-55.

²⁴ Coates’ reading at the time is recounted in Elizabeth Darling, *Reforming Britain*, p. 33.

²⁵ Gerald Barry, ‘Design for Living’, *The News Chronicle*, 12th July 1934.

²⁶ ‘Hampstead Housing Novelty: Human Nest Building’, *The Observer*, 17th June 1934.

²⁷ Letter from Jack Pritchard to Anthony Hunt, 16th December 1946. PP 16/1/3275.

²⁸ Letter from Gropius addressed to the Editor of *Horizon*, 10th January 1947. PP/16/2/27/26.

²⁹ ‘Modern Flats. Miss Thelma Cazalet MP opens a Hampstead Block’, *The Islington Gazette*, 10th July 1934.

³⁰ *Portsmouth Evening News*, 23rd July 1934.

³¹ *Bournemouth Daily Echo*, 13th July 1934.

³² Sparke, *The Modern Interior*, p. 41.

³³ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* [1923], trans. Fredrick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), p. 14 and p. 20.

³⁴ *The Medical Officer*, 28th July 1934, p. 40.

³⁵ *The News Chronicle*, 16th June 1934.

³⁶ Lewis, 'Home Builder', p. 255.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ PP 18/4/24.

³⁹ 'Aims of the DIA', unpublished document, 11th August 1931. PP/28/1.

⁴⁰ *BBC Quarterly Journal* (January 1932).

⁴¹ Between 1933 and 1939, 245,000 slum houses were cleared and 279,000 new ones built, with over 400,000 existing homes reconditioned. See John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 240-48.

⁴² Council for Art and Industry (Board of Trade), *The Working Class Home: Its Furnishing and Equipment* (London, 1937).

⁴³ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, p. 122.

⁴⁴ Jules Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550-1960* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 313.

⁴⁵ 'Architecture and the Common Man – some points for discussion', dated 22th November 1946. PP 7/1/60.

⁴⁶ *The Working Party Report on Furniture* [The Board of Trade] (London: HMSO), 1946, 'Preface'.

⁴⁷ John Gloag, *The English Tradition in Design* (London: Penguin, 1947), p. 35.

⁴⁸ Darling, *Re-forming Britain*, p. 143.

⁴⁹ Buckley, *Designing Modern Britain*, p. 133.

⁵⁰ Becky E. Conekin, *'The Autobiography of a Nation': The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 9.